

Constructing a minority group identity out of shared rejection: The case of international students

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Abstract

With a sample of international students, we investigated how perceptions of rejection by the host community are related to a sense of identification with other international students. Based on the rejection-identification model (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999) we predicted that perceiving prejudice from the host university would be negatively related to psychological well-being. We expected that group identification with international students would mediate a positive effect of perceived discrimination on self-esteem, thus suppressing the negative effect of perceiving prejudice on self-esteem. Consistent with predictions, results supported a model in which identification with international students increased in response to perceiving prejudice and suppressed the costs of perceiving oneself as excluded from the host community. Interestingly, identification with participants' home country was not predicted by perceptions of discrimination. Results are discussed in terms of how minority group members construct group identities in response to the intergroup context. Copyright © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Being a member of a minority group can have a number of psychological costs. In particular, perceiving that one's minority group is victimized by prejudice and discrimination can harm self-esteem and psychological well-being (see Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002b, for a review). However, a number of psychological mechanisms may reduce the costs of stigmatization (Crocker & Major, 1989). The rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999) claims that while perceiving prejudice has psychological costs, those costs are suppressed by increased identification with one's minority group. In this paper, we investigate the possibility that the suppression of the costs of perceiving discrimination is not limited to pre-existing, clearly defined group identities. Rather, we suggest that perceiving discrimination can help create a sense of group membership and identification with a group without a pre-existing history.

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THE REJECTION-IDENTIFICATION MODEL

The rejection-identification model consists of three hypothesized relationships between perceptions of discrimination, minority group identification, and psychological well-being. First, among members of disadvantaged groups, perceptions of discrimination encourage minority group identification. Second, perceptions of discrimination are likely to be subjectively experienced as rejection from the mainstream, and thus harm psychological well-being. Third, minority group identification will enhance psychological well-being. In sum, perceptions of discrimination are hypothesized to have two opposing effects on well-being—a direct negative effect and an indirect positive effect mediated by minority group identification. In the following sections, we elaborate on the theoretical rationale for each of the predictions.

Perceptions of Discrimination and Minority Group Identification

From a social identity theory perspective, Tajfel (1978) suggested that a minority group identity can be imposed ‘from the outside’ where none existed before. Group identity arises in context when boundaries separating the minority from the majority are perceived as impermeable, and ‘the assignment by others to a certain group . . . has certain social consequences which are common to all or most members of the group’ (p. 5). Tajfel’s point is that perceiving the self and others as facing common negative treatment in the form of prejudice and discrimination can *create* a minority group identity.

In a similar vein, self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) suggests that a sense of collective identity emerges in context when self-categorization at the group level ‘appears to be a meaningful way of organizing and making sense of social stimuli’ (Haslam, 2001, p. 50). A critical determinant of when a particular social categorization ‘makes sense’ is its degree of comparative fit—the extent to which differences between members of that category are seen as small compared to the differences between that category and other categories in that context. Thus, minority group members are likely to define themselves at the group level when they perceive that they share discriminatory treatment in common, and that they face particular forms of negative treatment that members of the majority do not.

Based on social identity theory, the rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999) argues that members of minority groups increase group identification in response to perceived prejudice and discrimination. Supporting this prediction, perceiving prejudice and minority group identification are correlated in a number of different types of minority groups (e.g., Crosby, Pufall, Snyder, O’Connell, & Whalen, 1989; Gurin & Townsend, 1986; Rollins, 1973). In an experimental test of this relationship, Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, and Spears (2001) provided people who have body piercings with bogus information about the pervasiveness of anti-piercing prejudice among members of the mainstream. Consistent with predictions, participants who were told that the majority of mainstream society would discriminate against them reported significantly more identification with other ingroup members than did participants who were told they could expect more positive treatment.

The Psychological Costs of Exclusion

A sense of belongingness and attachment to others appears to be a universal need. Indeed, numerous theorists have argued that humans are motivated to seek inclusion and avoid exclusion (e.g.

Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1997; Maslow, 1968; Rosenberg, 1979; Williams & Sommer, 1997). Because 'finding one's place' in the social world is necessary to subjectively experience one's existence as meaningful (Simon, 1999), being rejected is likely to harm self-esteem and other markers of psychological well-being. Indeed, empirical research has found that being rejected by others causes psychological harm by increasing anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Bowlby, 1973) and depression (Frale, 1993), lowering self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995), and creating the feeling that one's existence lacks meaning (Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998).

Among members of disadvantaged or stigmatized groups, perceiving rejection by the dominant majority is likely to be psychologically costly. Discrimination by the mainstream implies that one's social identity is excluded from what is considered 'normal'. Furthermore, discrimination may make it difficult to create meaningful social connections with members of the majority in many different types of situations. Thus, the rejection-identification model predicts that the perceived frequency and pervasiveness of discrimination negatively affects psychological well-being.

Conversely, the rejection-identification model also predicts that minority group identification can provide a sense of inclusion that enhances psychological well-being. Group identification provides individuals with a social and psychological 'place' within which they can establish a sense of meaning and identity (Simon, 1999; Spears, Jetten, & Scheepers, 2002). Minority group identification is correlated with psychological adjustment among a number of different kinds of stigmatized groups (Bat-Chava, 1994; Grossman, Wirt, & Davids, 1985; Munford, 1994; Phinney, 1990; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998), and experimental work has found that the mere presence of similarly stigmatized others raises self-esteem and lowers depression and anxiety (Frale, Pratt, & Hoey, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Furthermore, regardless of the ingroup's status, identification with ingroup social categories is associated with positive well-being (Branscombe & Wann, 1991).

Support for the Rejection-identification Model

The rejection-identification model has received empirical support in studies of African Americans (Branscombe et al., 1999), women (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002), and Mexican Americans (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002b). In each case, the more that participants perceived discrimination against them as pervasive, the worse they scored on measures of psychological well-being. However, perceiving pervasive prejudice also positively predicted minority group identification, which in turn positively predicted well-being. Thus, in support of the rejection-identification model, perceiving pervasive discrimination was painful, but some of that pain was suppressed by an increase in minority group identification.

However, no studies thus far have tested the rejection-identification model in a group without a prior history of devaluation. In a sense, shared rejection as a basis for group identity has previously been confounded with group memberships that are relatively chronic and have other shared attributes such as physical characteristics, culture, and traditions. Shared attributes and a common history can themselves be the basis for a sense of group identification and a source of well-being. A stronger and more conservative test of the rejection-identification model would require the examination of the effects of perceived devaluation among people with a more heterogeneous category membership and with no shared history. Such an investigation is useful because it can examine how common treatment alone, in the absence of other shared attributes, can create a connection to a group where none could have existed before. Furthermore, it could provide evidence for the idea that common treatment by the majority does not simply strengthen *existing* minority group identifications, but can serve as the *basis* for group formation and the construction of new group identities.

THE DISCOUNTING MODEL

In contrast to the rejection-identification model, other approaches have suggested that perceiving discrimination against one's minority group might afford self-protection. Based on the assumption that attributions to prejudice are external attributions, Crocker and Major (1989) argued that attributions to prejudice could protect the psychological well-being of minority group members by discounting the self as a cause of negative outcomes (cf. Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002a). Furthermore, they suggest that 'People who believe they personally are frequent victims of discrimination should be particularly likely to attribute negative outcomes or performance feedback to prejudice or discrimination against their group and, thus, may have high self-esteem' (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 621).

In addition to suggesting a very different relationship between perceptions of discrimination and well-being than that proposed by the rejection-identification model, the discounting model has also suggested a different kind of relationship between minority group identification and perceptions of discrimination. While the rejection-identification model suggests that perceiving discrimination encourages minority group identification, proponents of the discounting perspective have argued for the reverse causal direction—that minority group identification could encourage perceptions of discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Specifically, minority group identification, by making a particular identity chronically salient, makes discrimination against that group a more accessible explanation for one's outcomes across a variety of situations.

THE CURRENT STUDY: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

We examine these issues among a sample of international students at a university in the USA. The sample has a number of interesting characteristics with important theoretical significance. First, research indicates that international students often feel a sense of alienation and exclusion that is likely to have some basis in social reality (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986; Searle & Ward, 1990). Second, before arriving in the USA to study, participants had no experience as a member of the category 'international students'. Thus, there is little opportunity for them to have been socialized to identify with this group, as is often the case with many minority social categories (Gurin, Hurtado, & Peng, 1994; McLemore, 1991; Phinney, 1990). Lastly, international students as a group are quite heterogeneous, coming from different cultures with different languages, traditions, and even conflicting national interests in some cases. Because it is not a pre-existing, chronic identity, and because of its heterogeneity, examining this particular identity as a suppressor of the negative effects of perceived discrimination represents a more conservative test of the rejection-identification model than has been conducted previously.

International students who perceive discrimination have at least two potential identities that they might turn to in response to discrimination. One possibility might be to increase their identification with their home country. One's nationality is a chronically accessible category, sometimes precisely because of immersion in another group or culture (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978), and identification with that category is likely to be an important source of psychological well-being (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999, 2000). However, members of one's home country are highly unlikely to share in the experience of being a minority in the US context, and in that sense the national ingroup category is not so relevant to the international student's experience. An alternative response to perceived discrimination that we see as more likely is to identify with the category 'international students', who are more likely to share in the experience of being treated as an outsider or 'foreigner'. Despite

their different national origins, other international students have in common that they are not US citizens and are treated as such in the new context. Thus, identification with other international students is not based on similar intragroup traits, but is constructed in context based on their common treatment from the majority. In other words, shared traits are not the only basis of similarity at a higher level of abstraction (Turner et al., 1987), and in certain contexts, common treatment from the majority may be a more important basis for group identification.

We selected only non-European and non-native English-speaking students for participation in the study, because we anticipated that they would have more experience with discrimination than native English-speaking and European students. We measured international students' perceived experience with prejudice and discrimination by students at their new host university, self-esteem, identification with international students, and identification with their home country. Based on the rejection-identification model, we predicted that perceived discrimination would negatively affect self-esteem, and that only identification with international students would mediate a suppression of the negative effects of perceived discrimination. Although both forms of identification might be positively related to well-being, we predicted that perceived discrimination would only increase identification with international students, and not increase identification with one's home country. Therefore, only identification with international students was expected to suppress the negative effects of perceived discrimination.

In addition, we tested hypotheses suggested by the discounting perspective. First, this perspective suggests that identification with a minority group category will encourage perceptions of discrimination. Thus, the discounting perspective suggests that identification with participants' home country and with international students should predict perceptions of discrimination. More central to the discounting perspective is the hypothesis that perceiving discrimination will be positively related to psychological well-being. Thus, the discounting perspective suggests that identification with home country and international students have a positive effect on psychological well-being, mediated by perceptions of discrimination.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Research assistants (who were also international students), approached international students at the University of Kansas ($N = 99$) to ask them if they were willing to complete a short questionnaire concerning their experiences at the university. Only students who were from non-European and non-English-speaking countries were selected to participate in the study.

Materials

We first asked demographic questions concerning the participant's country of origin, gender, age, time spent in the USA, and year in school. Perceived prejudice and discrimination were measured with the average response to two items 'I feel like students at the University of Kansas look down on me because of my nationality' and 'Students at the University of Kansas have discriminated against me because I am not from the United States', $r = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$. Participants responded on a 1 ('strongly disagree') to 7 ('strongly agree') Likert-type scale.

Group identification was measured with two single-item measures, each tapping identification with a different social category. Participants were instructed, 'For each group listed below, please indicate

the extent to which you identify with that group'. We defined group identification for participants as 'how much you feel a part of that group, how much that group helps define who you are, and how much you value that group membership'. The two social categories listed were 'international students at the University of Kansas' and 'your country of origin'. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 ('I definitely do not identify with this group') to 7 ('I strongly identify with this group').

Self-esteem was measured with two items selected from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1979), 'I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others,' and 'I feel that I do not have much to be proud of' (reverse-scored). Participants responded on a 1 ('strongly disagree') to 7 ('strongly agree') Likert-type scale. The correlation between these two items was low, $r = 0.16$, $p < 0.06$. However, because both items come from the standard Rosenberg scale we averaged the two items to create a single self-esteem score.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Although we did not attempt to collect a representative sample of international students, we did sample a very diverse group of students from 32 different countries.¹ The sample was 64% male and 36% female. The median age was 22 years, with a range from 18 to 35. The median time spent at the University of Kansas was 3 years, with a range from 2 months to 13 years. The median time spent in the USA was three years, with a range from 2 months to 15 years. Thirteen per cent of the participants were in their first year of study, 12% in their second, 20% in third year, 22% were in fourth year, and 32% were in graduate school.

Testing the Rejection-identification Model

We hypothesized that perceived discrimination would negatively predict self-esteem. We predicted that perceived discrimination would also be positively related to identification with international students, which in turn would positively predict self-esteem. However, we did not expect that perceived discrimination would encourage identification with the participants' home country. Thus, we anticipated that only identification with international students would mediate an indirect positive effect of perceived discrimination on self-esteem.

We began by testing our hypothesis that perceived discrimination would be more strongly and positively predictive of identification with international students compared to identification with participants' home country. Perceived discrimination was positively related to identification with international students, $r = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$. In contrast, perceived discrimination was not reliably related to identification with home country, $r = -0.11$, $p = 0.29$. More importantly, as predicted, perceived discrimination was more positively related to identification with international students than to identification with home country, $t(97) = 2.48$, $p < 0.01$. Because identification with home country was not reliably related to perceived discrimination, only identification with international students could potentially mediate a relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem.

¹The composition of the sample in terms of nationality was as follows: Argentina ($n = 1$), Bolivia ($n = 2$), Brazil ($n = 5$), Chile ($n = 1$), China ($n = 1$), Costa Rica ($n = 1$), Cyprus ($n = 17$), Ecuador ($n = 1$), Egypt ($n = 5$), Ethiopia ($n = 2$), Greece ($n = 4$), Hong Kong ($n = 1$), India ($n = 3$), Indonesia ($n = 3$), Iran ($n = 2$), Japan ($n = 3$), Jordan ($n = 1$), Kuwait ($n = 10$), Malaysia ($n = 1$), Mexico ($n = 4$), Nigeria ($n = 1$), Pakistan, ($n = 4$), Palestine ($n = 2$), Panama ($n = 1$), Paraguay ($n = 3$), Peru ($n = 2$), Philippines ($n = 2$), Qatar ($n = 3$), Saudi Arabia ($n = 3$), Sri Lanka ($n = 3$), Turkey ($n = 1$), Venezuela ($n = 2$).

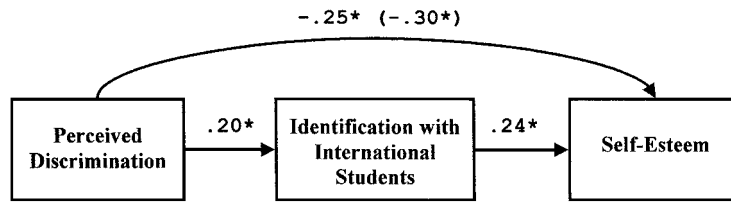


Figure 1. Rejection identification model testing for the direct negative effect of perceived prejudice on self-esteem, and indirect positive effect of perceived discrimination mediated by identification with international students. Path weights are standardized. * $p < 0.05$. Number in parentheses is the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem while controlling for identification with international students

Overall, perceived discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem, $\beta = -0.25$, $F(1, 98) = 6.67$, $p < 0.05$. However, our hypotheses suggest that perceived discrimination also has a positive indirect effect on self-esteem mediated by identification with international students. To test for this mediated effect we followed the method outlined by Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998) for testing a suppressor variable mediation model. We began by testing whether the initial variable predicts the mediator by regressing identification with international students onto perceived discrimination. As predicted, perceived discrimination positively predicted identification with international students, $\beta = 0.20$, $F(1, 98) = 4.11$, $p < 0.05$.

To assess whether identification with internationals might mediate a positive relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem, we regressed self-esteem onto identification with international students while controlling for perceived discrimination. As predicted, perceived discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem, $\beta = -0.30$, $F(1, 97) = 9.58$, $p < 0.01$. Also as predicted, identification with international students was positively related to self-esteem, meeting the next requirement to demonstrate mediation, $\beta = 0.24$, $F(1, 97) = 6.18$, $p < 0.05$. The Goodman (1960) test for mediation confirmed that the mediated path was reliably greater than zero, $z = 1.65$, $p < 0.05$. As shown in Figure 1, the results of this mediational analysis are consistent with the rejection-identification model. Because of the low correlation observed between the two items constituting the self-esteem measure, we repeated the central mediational analyses separately for each of these items. The results of these analyses replicated the results for the combined measure.²

Testing the Discounting Model

The discounting perspective suggests that minority group identification will positively predict well-being, and that this effect is mediated by the self-protection offered by perceptions of discrimination. We tested this hypothesis separately for identification with home country and identification with international students.

Kenny et al.'s (1998) first step for demonstrating mediation was met in the case of identification with home country. Identification with home country had a reliable and positive relationship with self-esteem, $\beta = 0.34$, $F(1, 98) = 13.18$, $p < 0.001$. We next assessed the second requirement for

²When we regressed the first self-esteem item ('I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others') onto identification with international students and perceived discrimination, perceived discrimination was, as predicted, negatively related to self-esteem, $\beta = -0.18$, $F(1, 97) = 3.24$, $p < 0.05$. Also as predicted, identification with international students was positively related to self-esteem, $\beta = 0.17$, $F(1, 97) = 2.96$, $p < 0.05$. When we conducted the same analysis for the second self-esteem item ('I feel that I do not have much to be proud of'), perceived discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem, $\beta = -0.27$, $F(1, 97) = 7.68$, $p < 0.01$. Identification with international students was positively related to self-esteem, $\beta = 0.19$, $F(1, 97) = 3.83$, $p < 0.05$.

demonstrating mediation by regressing perceptions of discrimination onto identification with home country. Contrary to the discounting model's predictions, identification with home country was not reliably related to perceptions of discrimination, $\beta = -0.11$, $F(1, 98) = 1.13$, $p = 0.29$. In fact, the relationship between identification with home country and perceptions of discrimination tended to be negative—the opposite direction than that predicted by the discounting perspective. Thus, because identification with home country did not reliably predict perceptions of discrimination, perceptions of discrimination could not be shown to mediate a positive relationship between identification with home country and self-esteem.

Turning to examining the discounting model's predictions for identification with international students, we first regressed self-esteem onto identification with international students. The relationship between identification with international students and self-esteem was reliably positive, $\beta = 0.18$, $F(1, 98) = 3.33$, $p < 0.05$. Proceeding to the second step required to demonstrate mediation, we assessed whether identification with internationals predicted perceptions of discrimination. Consistent with the prediction made by the discounting model, identification with international students was positively related to perceptions of discrimination, $\beta = 0.20$, $F(1, 98) = 4.11$, $p < 0.05$. Moving to the third step required to demonstrate mediation, we examined the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem while controlling for identification with international students. Contrary to the prediction made by the discounting model, perceived discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem, $\beta = -0.30$, $F(1, 97) = 9.58$, $p < 0.01$. In sum, whether examining identification with international students or identification with home country, the discounting model was not supported.

DISCUSSION

Our findings confirm predictions made by the rejection-identification model among international students. Identification with a pre-existing, long-term group membership such as their national group did not suppress the costs of perceiving discrimination on self-esteem. In contrast, identification with a category relevant to the local context did offer psychological protection, despite being a relatively new and heterogeneous category. Regression analyses supported a model in which perceived discrimination harmed the self-esteem of international students. However, in that model perceived prejudice also increased identification with international students, which in turn positively predicted self-esteem.

We found that identification with international students was the only form of identification that mediated a self-protective response to perceived discrimination. We suggest that perceived discrimination did not orient international students toward their home country because that group membership and its collective experience were not relevant to the international students' experiences with discrimination. According to self-categorization theory, group identities arise in context when meaningful differences are perceived to exist between the ingroup and the outgroup, and ingroup members are perceived to share important attributes or experiences in common. Perceived discrimination from the host community emphasizes both the differences between native and international students, and the common treatment that international students face. Essentially any self-aspect can provide the basis for a group identity *given the right context* (Simon, 1997). Thus, while nationality is a chronic and meaningful category, national identification was not related to perceptions of discrimination because one's national category was not relevant to the discrimination that our participants experienced. However, identification with international students was correlated with perceptions of discrimination, because, we argue, that category is relevant to the context in which our participants faced discrimination.

One of the unique aspects of our findings is that they demonstrate one factor that can encourage identification with a new ingroup category without a shared history. International students comprise quite a heterogeneous group of individuals from different countries with distinct cultures, and in some cases, conflicting national interests. Because of these differences, it could be very difficult for these individuals to get along, much less form a group. As we have demonstrated, however, common treatment from the majority alone may be enough to create a sense of identification with a newly created category. We found that international students turned toward a new group identity based on common difference from the majority, not toward their particular nationality. As suggested by self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), the differences between international students may be perceived as relatively small compared to their collective difference from US citizens at the host university. In other words, grounded in the social context of intergroup relations and common treatment by the majority, this group identity is based not on who they are, but on who they are not (i.e. not from the USA).

Our tests of the discounting model received no support from these data. Most importantly, we found that the relationship between perceived discrimination and self-esteem was negative, but the discounting perspective predicts the reverse. Research among African Americans and women have also found a negative relationship between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002). Furthermore, we found that perceived discrimination was reliably predicted by identification with international students, but not by identification with participants' home country. If group identification makes prejudice a more chronically salient explanation for negative outcomes, it is not clear why this should only be true for one form of group identification.

Limitations

Although our findings are highly consistent with predictions, this research does have limitations. First, the study is based on correlational data. However, experimental research has found that perceiving prejudice against a minority ingroup can harm well-being (e.g. Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). More generally, social rejection has been shown experimentally to harm self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995). In addition, experimental research has shown that perceptions of discrimination have a causal effect on minority group identification (Jetten et al., 2001; Simon et al., 1998). Thus, the relationships we observed have been shown to occur experimentally in the causal direction in which we interpret them.

Furthermore, a different theoretical model suggesting other causal relationships was not confirmed with the pattern of relationships we found. The discounting model suggests that group identification can encourage perceptions of prejudice and discrimination, and that perceptions of discrimination are positively related to well-being (Crocker & Major, 1989). However, we found that perceptions of discrimination were negatively related to well-being. Second, the discounting perspective cannot account for why perceived discrimination had reliably different relationships with identification with participants' home country and identification with international students. From the point of view of the discounting model, it is not clear why identification with one's home country would be unrelated (and tend to be negatively related) to perceived prejudice. However, this pattern of relationships makes sense from the perspective of the rejection-identification model, which suggests that perceived discrimination against international students should predict identification with international students but not identification with one's home country because perceived discrimination only encourages identification with categories that are relevant to the social context. Although we did not test all possible models, we did test the two that can be clearly derived from the theoretical literature relevant to the relationships between perceptions of discrimination, minority group identification, and psychological well-being.

Second, we measured the key conceptual variables in our model with only a few items. Furthermore, the items we used to measure self-esteem had a low intercorrelation, although they both came from the standard Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory. Consistent with our predictions, however, we were able to replicate the critical analysis for each self-esteem item separately. Measuring the variables with a few items probably hurt our chances of confirming predictions more than it could have helped them because having more items would have reduced measurement error. In addition, the rejection-identification model has previously been supported using a wide degree of measures of perceived discrimination and well-being (Branscombe et al., 1999; Schmitt et al., 2002).

Future Directions

Although the present findings extend previous research on the rejection-identification model, a number of issues still await exploration. While we found that perceived discrimination was only related to a contextually relevant identity, other social contextual factors are also likely to affect the relationship between perceived discrimination and minority group identity. As suggested by social identity theory, isolated encounters with discrimination are unlikely to encourage minority group identification. When status boundaries between groups are permeable, minority group members are more likely to distance from the ingroup and engage in individual mobility attempts (Tajfel, 1978). However, as we found, the more that discrimination is perceived as frequent and pervasive, group identification is likely to increase.

We argue that minority group identification enhances psychological well-being by providing individuals with a sense of inclusion. However, the exact mechanisms by which this effect on well-being occurs require further exploration. Minority group identities may also incorporate a sense of collective efficacy that provides minority group members with a sense of hope concerning the future. In addition, group identification is likely to encourage affiliation with ingroup members, and thus increase access to emotional, informational, and material social support.

Conclusions

These findings suggest that people experiencing discrimination are not likely simply to cling to whatever social categories they have available to them. Instead, they identify with a group that is relevant to the discrimination they experience and the context in which they find themselves. In that sense, these data make a more general point concerning how people come to psychologically identify with a particular social group. As social identity theory suggests, identification with a social group arises out of the social context of intergroup relations, and is a function of how individuals interpret that social context. Thus, the rejection-identification model is not just a model of how perceived discrimination encourages identification with an existing group identity, but also describes how perceived discrimination can lead to the formation of a new minority group identity.

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